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Review of The Altruists

Michael F. Russo Etc.

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, mrusso1@lsu.edu

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The Alter family of St. Louis, Missouri is disharmonious, dysfunctional, its individual members seemingly irreconcilable. Arthur, the family's head, is an engineering instructor, a well-meaning man whose single foray into do-gooderism ends in fiasco: his project to bring sanitation to underdeveloped Africa succeeds only in spreading deadly sleeping sickness. His recently-deceased wife, Francine, has willed her secretly-accumulated fortune directly to their two adult children, a slap at Arthur for his infidelity. Without that money, Arthur will lose his house. Naturally, he concocts a scheme to ingratiate himself to his kids in order to get it. What could possibly go wrong?

Through a series of sketches and flashbacks, Ridker creates characters that frustrate, engage, and ultimately inspire. Though interpersonal incompetence and bitterness seem the dominant forces driving these characters, their fundamental love for one another prevails. Ridker's debut novel is humorous and poignant, both results sprouting from the identical root. But for the author's skill and regard for his creations this story could easily have ended in the depressed manner of some of William Goldman's character-driven narratives of decades ago.

VERDICT: For readers drawn to flawed characters and their redemption.